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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000482

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SUBJECT: GOK EFFORTS TO ELIMINATE EXTREMIST INFLUENCES IN KUWAIT'S EDUCATIONAL CURRICULUM

Classified By: PAO John Moran for reason 1.5 (b)

1. (C/NF) Summary: Embassy PAO met January 27 with Kuwait's Minister of Education, Dr. Mus'aad al-Haroun, to discuss his ministry's efforts to reform the country's secondary school curriculum and the (false) reports of embassy interference in this process. Al-Haroun, who obtained undergraduate and doctoral degrees in education from the US, confirmed that his ministry was in the process of working with a team of religious scholars to clarify the definition and history of "Jihad" in secondary school textbooks so that young people would understand that Islam "is a religion of moderation that respects other cultures and religions." The effort, which has engendered an outpouring of heated press editorials from Islamists claiming that the Minister is seeking to redefine Islam, is part of a broader program by the GOK to curb extremist influences among the young. Al-Haroun also said that a highly confidential plan is in place to remove teachers and principals who espouse conservative Islamist principles from Kuwait's schools, and that a clamp-down on what is being taught in Kuwait's Islamist-run summer camps is in the works. Post however has reason to doubt the strident optimism expressed by the Minister in regard to long term GOK determination or ability to reform the educational curriculum. End Summary.

2. (U) A number of recent reports and op/eds in Kuwait's Arabic dailies have accused the US Embassy of being behind a plan by the Ministry of Education to excise certain Quranic references from textbooks used by Kuwaiti students at the middle and high school levels. Most reports allege that the Ministry of Education plan involves removing the subject of "Jihad" from the religious studies curriculum, and deleting any reference to Israel as an enemy of Arabs and Muslims. The editorial response from religious conservatives in Kuwait has been predictably heated. "If true, the US Embassy has passed all boundaries," writes Islamist Khaled al-Sultan in a representative commentary, while others lash out at the Ministry of Education and Kuwaiti liberals in general as seeking to rewrite or expunge sacred writ from the education of young Kuwaitis. In meetings, embosfs have been asked by contacts why the embassy has embarked on such an intrusive and counterproductive strategy; our response that these allegations are false has not convinced many of our interlocutors.

3. (C) During a meeting with Embassy PAO, Kuwait's Minister of Education, Dr. Mus'aad al-Haroun, said he has firmly denied to members of the National Assembly and others in Kuwait that the MOE has consulted with the embassy on the issue of educational reform, and considers the allegation merely a tactical move by Islamists to stifle his efforts to reform Kuwait's secondary school curriculum. Al-Haroun said that the MOE has already put into place changes in the secondary school curriculum in science, mathematics and languages. Now, he said, it's time for the social studies and the Islamic studies segments to be reformed.

4. (C) Al Haroun said that newspaper reports that the MOE planned to excise segments relating to the impossibility of making peace with Israel were false, as the Palestinian-Israeli issue was "too explosive politically" to touch, but confirmed that his ministry was working with religious scholars to come up with a segment that puts the principle of "Jihad" into an appropriate modern context. He said that he is concerned that young people will read the history of the early days of Islam, with its calls for the elimination of polytheists and its delineated status for "people of the book," as an invitation to intolerance and an implied justification of al-Qaeda's message. He said that the point of the reform was not to remove references to Jihad, but to explain it in a way that underscores respect for all religions. He said that many of those criticizing this are merely grandstanding for upcoming parliamentary elections, and that he has been "compelled" to meet with Islamist organizations to assure them that the MOE does not intend to take religion out of the curriculum or to re-write the Quran. Nonetheless, he said, the MOE is determined to implement these changes, which he described as particularly necessary for young men ages 14-18, and will not be dissuaded by criticism.

5. (C/NF) Al-Haroun also said that his ministry is moving to

get extremist teachers and principals out of the schools. Whatever might be in the curriculum, he said, "we don't know what goes on behind the classroom door." He said that this effort to rid the educational system of those who foster unwholesome ideas is something that the government is going about with extreme secrecy, and emphasized that the embassy must keep this confidential. He said the GOK is also very concerned about what is being said in mosques and in the summer and "spring break" camps run by Islamists for children, and that the Council of Ministers has agreed that they must move aggressively in this area as well. Al-Haroun said that Islamists in Kuwait were influential because they are well organized and financed--"the only really well-organized movement in the country"--but that he did not think they posed a threat over the long-term. The only really dangerous elements, he said, were small cells of extremists that he said were still active in the country.

16. (C) Comment: Al-Haroun evinced great confidence that curriculum reform issues and the other efforts to combat extremist influence in Kuwait were moving apace, and that the vast majority of Kuwaitis support these measures (or would support them if they knew their extent.) His manner suggested determination that the GOK could and would make the changes necessary to protect young people from the nefarious influences of extremist Islam. Of course, this is the message we would want and expect to hear from official Kuwaitis, so we're not too surprised to hear him say it. According to newspaper commentary, Islamist influence in education is deeply embedded, and includes not just doctrinal training but anti-Western, anti-Christian intolerance and use of peer and school pressure to stifle progressive attitudes and perspectives. Liberal contacts in the Kuwaiti media tell us that liberals consider al-Haroun's educational reform efforts as slow and ineffectual, and entertain doubts as to his ability to move against this allegedly entrenched elite of conservative Islamists.

17. (C) Comment Continued: We also note that even with the proposed clarification of Jihad in Kuwait's curriculum, the Minister's declaration that references to Israel would remain in their unreformed fashion makes us question the seriousness of current GOK educational reform efforts. An informal PAS look at a section on the Arab-Israeli conflict from a ninth-grade social studies textbook entitled "The Arab World," for example, reveals the following text: "Normalization is the main goal of the peace process. This normalization aims at perpetuating Israeli presence in the region. Peace from the Israeli perspective is a comprehensive operation that targets the mind and heart of the Muslim individual to remove his hatred of the Jews in accordance with the holy Quran: 'And they will not cease from fighting against thee until they have made thee a renegade from thy religion, if they can. (Al Baqara 217)' The peace challenge will always be there, especially since the Arab-Israeli conflict is eternal, as per God's word in the holy Quran: 'And the Jews shall not be pleased with thee, nor will the Christians, until thou follow their creed. (Al Baqara 120).'" PAS and POL section are now engaged in a fuller review of Kuwaiti school textbooks to be reported septel.

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